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## Trump's 'imperial presidency' looms as he completes takeover of Republican party

Published on July 18, 2024

Document Date: Fri, Mar 20 2026 11:53:35 pm

Category: ,English,International - ,Snippets

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MILWAUKEE:

Five days after narrowly escaping assassination, Donald Trump will accept his presidential nomination on Thursday before an adoring crowd of supporters, the final act in his transformation of the Republican Party into the party of Trump. His brush with death has fueled the growing quasi-religious fervor among the party faithful, elevating him from political leader to a man they believe is protected by God. "Trump, Trump, Trump" attendees roared at the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee when he appeared each night this week, his right ear bandaged, to listen to speaker after speaker intone reverentially about him and reference God's hand in his survival from a would-be assassin's bullet. Republicans are uniting behind him this week. With most dissent quelled and his grip on the party never tighter, Trump will be in a

much stronger position than in his 2017-2021 term to follow through on his agenda if he wins the Nov. 5 election. Untrammelled by the internal divisions that sometimes stymied him in his first term, Trump would be freer to pursue hard-edged policies that include mass deportations as part of a crackdown on illegal migration, aggressive trade policies, and dismissing government officials seen as insufficiently loyal. “You need a strong leader at the top,” said Bill Dowd, a 79-year-old lumber business owner who was a guest of the Colorado delegation in Milwaukee. “I’m a very, very big Ronald Reagan fan. Ronald Reagan pulled the party together also,” Dowd said. Dowd acknowledged that some of his Republican friends feared that Trump might try to abuse his power. He said while he did not share that fear he believed that dissent should not be stifled in any party. For Trump’s critics and political opponents, this is a dark and disturbing moment: they see the modern Republican Party as a cult of personality, a base from which Trump could pursue extreme policies and create America’s first truly imperial presidency, threatening the future of its democratic norms. “Donald Trump has called for the ‘termination’ of the Constitution, promised to be a ‘dictator’ ‘on day one,’ and now his Supreme Court justices say he can rule without any checks on his power,” said Ammar Moussa, campaign spokesman for incumbent President Joe Biden, Trump’s Democratic rival. “Trump is a liar, but we believe him when he says he will rule as a dictator,” Moussa said. Trump campaign spokesman Steven Cheung said Democratic assertions

that Trump threatens American democracy and could become an autocrat if reelected were “fear mongering” and a “blatant effort to deceive the American people.” In Milwaukee, nearly all of the 30 delegates, guests and elected Republicans interviewed by Reuters for this story acknowledged that their party had become the party of Trump but dismissed any suggestion that it had become cult-like. “I believe that President Trump is a transformational figure, a man of destiny who God providentially saved from death on Saturday,” Louisiana delegate Ed Tarpley said. “He’s been given a special mission in our country. God’s providential hand has elevated Donald Trump to a different status.” Those interviewed said they wanted a President Trump who was not constrained by bureaucracy or Congress to execute his agenda. They were in favor of more expansive use of executive action – decisions made by a president that do not need congressional approval. They want nothing to stand in the way of his plans to deport millions of people in the country illegally and to reduce the size of the federal bureaucracy. In his first term Trump often complained of “deep state” bureaucrats he said were seeking to thwart him. “The president ... must be allowed to implement his policies free of a bureaucracy resistant to them and unelected officials who do not agree with them,” Tarpley said. There are constitutional limits to what Trump can do through the power of his office, however, and any policies could still face lawsuits. Half of Republican respondents to a Reuters/Ipsos poll this week said they agreed with the statement that “the

country is in a crisis and needs a strong president who should be allowed to rule without too much interference from the courts and Congress.” That was substantially higher than the 35% of Democrats and 33% of independents who agreed with the sentiment. Only one convention attendee interviewed by Reuters, a senior Republican from a southern state, said he was worried about a second Trump administration. He said he feared Trump would become an autocrat, fill government agencies with yes men, and seek revenge on his political enemies. Referring to Trump’s pledge to supporters that he will be their “retribution,” the Republican, who asked to remain anonymous, said: “That effort will be horrendous.” Trump was widely criticized for saying during the campaign that should he win, he will be a “dictator” – if only for a day, a comment he later said was a joke. Democrats have rebuked him for promising to pardon his supporters imprisoned for the deadly Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol that was triggered by his refusal to accept his 2020 election loss. Trump, who was convicted for making hush money payments to a former porn star and faces charges related to his efforts to overturn Biden’s victory, has threatened to use the Justice Department to pursue his opponents, including Biden. Former Republican presidential candidate Asa Hutchinson said he was concerned about the lack of constraints on Trump in a second term. “The Department of Justice is probably the perfect example of that. Clearly, a President Trump would have a close hand at directing the

activities of the Justice Department,” Hutchinson, a former governor of Arkansas, told Reuters. The implications of a second Trump term are profoundly disturbing for America and the world, said presidential historian Timothy Naftali, a former director at the presidential library of Richard Nixon, who resigned from office in disgrace in 1974 after the Watergate scandal. Naftali said a recent Supreme Court decision granting sweeping immunity to a president for most acts while in office, combined with a pliant Republican Party, means there are limited constraints on Trump should he act maliciously and exploit the office for his own personal power and political retribution. “He can gut the Justice Department and engage in a revenge tour that would make Nixon blush,” Naftali said. To be sure, Trump would not be the first president to test the limits of executive power. Leaders including former Democratic presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Barack Obama have taken an expansive view of their authority. Even with the July 1 ruling by the high court on presidential immunity, Trump ostensibly would still be bound by the U.S. Constitution’s separation of powers that reserves key functions to Congress and the judiciary. Lara Trump, the Republican National Committee co-chair and Trump’s daughter-in-law, acknowledged this week that governance by executive action – which can be overturned in the courts or by a successor – was not ideal. That’s why it was crucial for Republicans to hold onto the House of Representatives in November and take the Senate from Democrats, she said, “so we don’t have to rely on executive

actions and we can actually see some lasting change.”